

Transparent meddling, opaque funding: the EU and NGOs

European Union officials' reluctance to detail their funding of Israeli and Palestinian NGOs may arise from the EU's fear of public criticism of its role in alienating millions of Israelis - who reject neo-colonialist efforts to use these NGOs to manipulate Israeli democracy.

By Gerald M. Steinberg | Jan.08, 2013 | 10:39 AM

On 29 September 1999, a small committee of the European Commission met to allocate €5 million for "Middle East Peace Projects" to what are ostensibly non-governmental organizations (NGOs). No protocol or record was published for the public, in contrast to most meetings involving EU allocations. This committee awarded grants to a number of groups, including "The Four Mothers Movement to Leave Lebanon in Peace" (€250,000); and to Peace Now (€400,000) for, as recorded in the protocol, promoting their political agenda among "a social group that traditionally has anti-peace views and votes Likud" and among "immigrants from the former Soviet Union."

The only reason that we have this information is due to a leaked protocol from this single meeting. In the thirteen years that have followed, all documents related to EU funding for dozens of Israeli and Palestinian political NGOs have been labeled top secret - reminiscent of the most highly classified military plans and nuclear weapons designs. As a result, even members of the European Parliament are also denied substantive information.

On November 27, 2012, the European Court of Justice rejected my petition requesting the public release of meeting records and evaluations from the past decade under the EU's Freedom of Information Act. NGO Monitor was represented pro-bono by Israel's largest UK law firm, but, after waiting almost three years, and in an extraordinary violation of the ECJ's rules of judicial procedures, we were prevented from presenting the case. To protect the EU's most important secrets, the ECJ handed down a decision without even hearing oral arguments. It blindly accepted EU assertions that public disclosure of the details of funding decisions would lead to violence, and no attempt was made to examine the record and the implausibility of such scenarios. The identities of the NGO recipients are known - many boast about their European funding; but the EU decision making has been kept secret. The ruling - for a change, a public document - is filled with inconsistencies, and also avoids the core issues regarding due process and the public's right to know.

What can explain this total absence of accountability, and the Court's rubber stamp approval? Perhaps EU officials fear being held responsible for wasting taxpayer funds, particularly during a deep economic crisis. While the EU funds a few political advocacy NGOs in other democracies (three in the U.S., a handful in Canada, for example - and not in secret), there is nothing comparable to the scale of its involvement in Israeli civil society. The total annual amount being channeled from the EU (including the European Instrument for Human Rights and Democracy and other frameworks), and individual governments (EU member states, Norway and Switzerland) to Israeli political advocacy groups is one of the official secrets. However, fifty million euros is a reasonable estimate. I base this on the following calculation: There are about 50 Israeli NGOs active in these areas (human rights, democracy, peace) and the average annual combined grants received from European government donors is about €1 million, as recorded in the organizations' own reports; larger NGOs such as Btselem, Peace Now, Yesh Din, Adalah and Mossawa tend to receive proportionally more funding while smaller-scale operations get less. Over 12 years, this amounts to €600 million - 3 billion shekels at current rates - without any evidence of having furthered the stated goal of promoting peace. And in an environment of intense secrecy, it is unlikely that the EU's elected officials can make any intelligent

assessments.

Indeed, instead of peace, European funding has added to the violence and conflict. In 1999, the Mothers Movement used their EU grant to finance a political campaign that played a central role in the Israeli unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000 (in this very limited sense, the EU policy succeeded). But then Hezbollah's attacks increased, eventually leading to the 2006 war. It would not look good for EU officials to be seen as having been even partly responsible (by acting irresponsibly) for these events.

Similarly, European officials understandably fear public criticism of their role in alienating millions of Israelis who reject the neo-colonialist effort to use groups like Peace Now to manipulate Israeli democracy. €600 million from European taxpayers allows their well-compensated lawyers and public relations firms to flood the courts with frivolous political lawsuits, and to travel around the world campaigning against Israel. This European infringement on Israeli sovereignty has become a hot issue, and Israeli politicians have competed and continue to compete for support through legislation designed to curtail such meddling.

In addition, when the veil of secrecy is lifted, Europeans might also find conflicts of interest among the officials involved. Generally speaking, a lack of transparency in government funding, particularly related to international aid, is an invitation to corruption, characterized as “the cycle of mutual support” by Linda Pullman in her book *War Games: The Story of Aid and War in Modern Times*. The names of officials, consultants, and others who decide where this NGO money goes are hidden. Why do some groups get money year after year, without contributing to the goals set out by the EU? This is not an ideological issue – both Left and Right should be totally in agreement with the fundamental democratic requirement for transparency.

These questions regarding European behavior and the lack of transparency are central to the EU-Israeli dialogue on shared values. Perhaps the most effective response would be for Israel to agree to fund (openly) European organizations that promote transparency and good government, in order to help the EU learn and adopt the principles of transparency, accountability and due process of law, including by the courts.

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